



Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

THE EFFECTS OF THE NATO-EUROPEAN DIVERGENCE ON TURKEY'S SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract:

This article examines the effects of NATO-EU divergence on Turkey's security architecture from historical, structural, and contemporary perspectives. The tension between NATO's collective defense and the EU's strategic autonomy shapes Turkey's role and security policies. Turkey's defense industry rise, geopolitical position, risks (S-400 crisis, EU exclusion), and opportunities (Black Sea leadership, technological autonomy) are analyzed. In 2025, Trump's withdrawal of Ukraine support deepened the divide, increasing Turkey's importance to the EU, raising demands like visa liberalization and Customs Union revision, and highlighting Turkey's potential in a new world closer to the second group (EU, UK, China) while balancing ties with the first (US, Russia, India, Iran, Israel). Effective management could position Turkey as a global actor, contingent on internal stability, economy, and diplomacy.

Keywords: NATO-EU divergence, Turkish security Architecture, Strategic autonomy, New World Order, Geopolitical advantages

NATO-AVRUPA AYRIŞMASININ TÜRKİYE'NİN GÜVENLİK MİMARİSİ ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİLERİ

Öz

Bu makale, Kuzey Atlantik Antlaşması Örgütü (NATO) ve Avrupa Birliği (AB) ayrışmasının Türkiye'nin güvenlik mimarisine etkilerini tarihsel, yapısal ve güncel açılardan inceler. NATO'nun kolektif savunma yapısı ile AB'nin stratejik özerklik arayışı, Türkiye'nin ittifak içindeki rolünü ve güvenlik politikalarını şekillendirir. Savunma sanayisindeki yükseliş, jeopolitik konum, riskler (S-400 krizi, AB'nin dışlayıcılığı) ve fırsatlar (Karadeniz liderliği, teknolojik özerklik) analiz edilmiştir. Trump'ın Ukrayna desteğini kesmesi ayrışmayı derinleştirirken, Türkiye'nin AB için önemi artmış; vize serbestisi, Gümrük Anlaşması revizyonu gibi talepler gündeme gelmiş ve yeni dünya düzeninde Türkiye'nin ikinci grup (AB, İngiltere, Çin) ile yakın, birinci grup (ABD, Rusya, Hindistan, İran, İsrail) ile dengeli ilişkileri öne çıkmıştır. Türkiye, bu ayrışmayı iyi yönetirse küresel bir aktör olabilir; başarı iç istikrar, ekonomi ve diplomasiye bağlıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: NATO-AB ayrışması, Türk güvenlik mimarisi, Stratejik özerklik, Yeni dünya düzeni, Jeopolitik avantajlar

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Introduction

As a strategic member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a long-standing candidate country of the European Union (EU), Turkey is directly affected by the transformation of relations between these two structures. With its accession to NATO in 1952, Turkey played a key role on the alliance's southeastern flank throughout the Cold War, and the Ankara Treaty signed with the EU in 1963 initiated an economic and political partnership. Today, however, the divergence between EU policies shaped around the concept of 'strategic autonomy' and the US-led NATO structure is triggering significant transformations in Turkey's security architecture. The ongoing effects of the Ukraine war, disputes over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, the S-400 crisis, Turkey's global position in the defense industry, and strategic developments in the Black Sea provide key contexts for understanding the implications of this divergence for Turkey. With Turkey's second presidential election in 2025, the US's tendency to reduce its NATO commitments, for example by cutting support to Ukraine and forcing Europe to assume its own defense, has deepened this divergence. This has made Turkey's geopolitical advantages more important in relation to Europe's security needs.

This article aims to systematically analyze the formation of NATO and EU security architectures, the dynamics of the divergence between the two structures, and their impact on Turkey's national security policies. The paper consists of three main parts: (1) a historical and structural analysis of the NATO-EU security architecture, (2) a comprehensive examination of the causes and dynamics of the NATO-EU divergence, and (3) a detailed assessment of the implications of this divergence on Turkey's security architecture.

1.1. The Security Architecture of NATO and the EU

1.2. The History of NATO's Security Architecture

NATO's security architecture was shaped in the geopolitical environment of the Cold War when it was established by the Washington Treaty on April 4, 1949. This alliance, which was created to ensure the security of the Western bloc against the expansionist policies of the Soviet Union, is based on the principle of collective defense, and Article 5 guarantees that an attack against any member state will be considered an attack against the entire alliance (Bilgin, 2003). The establishment of NATO should be seen not only as a military alliance but also as a mechanism that reinforces the ideological unity of the Western world. Turkey joined NATO in 1952 along with Greece, gaining a strategic position on the southern flank of the alliance. This membership enabled Turkey to function as a buffer zone against the Soviet threat throughout the Cold War, and Turkey's contribution to NATO's deterrence capacity was demonstrated by the Incirlik Base hosting US strategic bombers and the Kürecik Radar Station playing a role in ballistic missile defense (Aydın, 2015). During the Cold War, the Incirlik Base served as a hub for US nuclear capabilities in the region, while the Kürecik Radar System enhanced early warning and tracking capabilities against ballistic missile threats (Yiğittepe, 2018). With the election of Donald Trump as president for the second time, the strategic use of Incirlik has become a matter of debate again, and the US withdrawal of support from Ukraine has made NATO's operational capacity more dependent on Turkish bases (Reuters, 2025).

NATO's security architecture is based on a system that standardizes the military capabilities of member states. Joint exercises, standard defense systems, and intelligence sharing are key elements of this architecture. AWACS (Airborne Early Warning and Control) aircraft, which are part of the Patriot Air Defense, increase intelligence and surveillance capacity (Ünüvar, 2024). Turkey's hosting of these systems has contributed significantly to NATO; for example, the Patriot batteries deployed in Turkey in 2012 against threats from Syria are an indication of this (Yiğittepe, 2017). Large-scale exercises such as the Trident Juncture alliance have strengthened operational readiness and Turkey's strategic position in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean has enabled it to

actively participate in these exercises (Baykara, 2022). In the post-Cold War period, NATO's assumption of new tasks such as crisis management and peacekeeping shows that the alliance's mission has expanded and transformed into a more flexible structure (Bölme, 2022). The peace operations in Bosnia and Kosovo are some of the examples of NATO's new practices; Turkey played an important role in these operations with logistical support and troop contribution.

NATO's security architecture in the current era reflects an effort to adapt to modern threats. Cyber defense systems have strengthened the alliance's adaptation to next-generation threats such as warfare elements and cyber attacks. The NATO Cyber Defense Center (CCDCOE) plays an important role in this field, and Turkey contributes to this field with cyber security solutions developed by national defense companies such as ASELSAN and STM (Doğan and Kabayel, 2023). The 2021 Strategic Concept reflects the alliance's effort to move its security architecture into the future by focusing on technological innovations; Turkey's place in this vision draws attention to its geographical location and technological capacity (Aydın, 2019; Casale, 2022). Especially since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, NATO's deterrence strategy on its eastern flank has been strengthened, additional troops have been provided to Poland and the Baltic states, and security measures in the Black Sea region have been significantly increased (Ünüvar, 2024). Turkey's role in this period became concrete with the implementation of the Montreux Straits Convention and military support to Ukraine; NATO's operational presence in the Black Sea is shaped by Turkey's strategic moves (Baykara, 2022). In 2025, Trump's withdrawal of support to Ukraine and the cyber defense move made the contributions of Turkish companies such as ASELSAN more critical in NATO's hybrid threat strategies; Russia's major attack on March 8, 2025, made this need clear (The Guardian, 2025).

The evolution of NATO's security architecture is not only military but also political and technological. In the post-Cold War period, the alliance's expansion and adaptation to new threats have been an indication that NATO is a dynamic organization. In this process, Turkey, with its geographical location and military capabilities, has served as a bridge on the southern flank of the alliance; the use of the Incirlik base in operations in the Middle East region and the role of the Kürecik Radar Station against regional threats such as Iran are the most concrete examples of this contribution (Aydın, 2015)

1.3. Historical Development of the EU's Security Architecture

Unlike NATO, the European Union's security architecture has evolved as an extension of the processes of economic and political integration. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty launched the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as the first sign of the EU's effort to create a unified foreign policy voice. The Cologne Summit in 1999 launched the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), aiming to give the EU an independent role in peacebuilding, crisis management, and humanitarian operations (Efe, 2008). Initially, CSDP relied on NATO's military capacity; for example, the EUFOR Althea operation in Bosnia was logistically supported by NATO. However, since the 2010s, the EU has taken significant steps to develop its own defense systems in search of strategic autonomy, reflecting the EU's claim to be not only an economic union but also a security actor (İnaç, 2021). With Trump's rise to power, the EU's quest for autonomy gained momentum; the commitment to increase defense spending at the summit held in Brussels on 6 March 2025 crystallized the effort to develop a system independent of NATO (The Telegraph, 2025).

The EU's defense system is based on a hybrid system that combines 'soft power' elements with military capacity. Operation EUNAVFOR MED demonstrated the EU's maritime security capacity in the fight against migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean, showing its importance in crisis management (Aşçı and Öztürk, 2017). The EU Global Strategy document, published in 2016, presented a vision of a NATO-independent defense, centered on the concept of 'strategic

autonomy' and supported by Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund (EDF) (Çelik, 2017). PESCO provides a framework covering more than 60 defense projects, and the EDF provided €8 billion to the defense industry in the 2021- 2027 budget (Turhan, 2019). PESCO projects include Eurodrone, next-generation tanks, and cyber defense systems. These initiatives have enhanced the EU's quest for technological autonomy (Fiott, 2020). Today, the EU's investments in the defense industry have increased; artificial intelligence-based technologies and defense systems developed against hybrid threats are improving the EU's security architecture (Özışık, 2023).

The EU's operational capacity has been strengthened through missions such as EUFOR and EUTM. Operation EUFOR Althea promoted stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while EUTM Mali enhanced the EU's role in crisis management in Africa (Aydın, 2019). As an operational reflection of the EU's quest for autonomy, these EU missions have generally been conducted without relying on NATO's military power. However, Turkey's exclusion from these projects highlights the EU's exclusionary policies in its security architecture; its exclusion from EDF funding in 2021 shows that this stance is shaped by political tensions (Atatorun, 2023; Kalyalev, 2020). Current EU dynamics are characterized by issues such as the Ukrainian war and energy security. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led the EU to increase its financial and military aid to Ukraine, which has reached a significant level (European Commission, 2022). However, EU coordination with NATO remains limited and reinforces the operational dimension of the divergence.

The energy resources of the Eastern Mediterranean are an important test for the EU's security architecture. The tensions between Turkey and Greece keep the EU's sanctions against Turkey on the agenda; the support given to Greece and the decisions taken against Turkey show that political biases are effective in EU security policies (Tsakiris, 2021). This attitude of the EU contradicts NATO's neutral mediation efforts and highlights both the operational and political dimensions of the divergence in the security architectures of the two structures.

1.4. Fundamentals of Cooperation and Divergence between NATO and the EU

Cooperation between NATO and the EU has been shaped especially in the post-Cold War period. The 1999 Helsinki Summit gave the EU access to NATO's military system, and this relationship was finalized in 2003 with the Berlin Plus Agreement (Efe 2008). Operation Concordia (2003) was the first EU military mission to use NATO resources in Macedonia, signaling the mutual relationship and commitment of the two structures (Aşçı and Öztürk, 2017). However, political tensions between Turkey and Cyprus hindered this cooperation and Turkey used its veto in NATO-EU negotiations to block some of the EU's initiatives (Aydın, 2015; Bölme, 2022). This shows how sensitive cooperation is to political dynamics.

NATO-EU relations are currently undergoing a new test. While NATO's 2021 Strategic Concept aims to enhance the partnership with the EU, problems in aid coordination during the war in Ukraine and divergent approaches in the Eastern Mediterranean have led to criticism (Kostak, 2024). Although Turkey contributes as an active NATO member, tensions in its relations with the EU have cast a shadow over this cohesion. NATO's mechanism in the Eastern Mediterranean attempted to reduce tensions between Turkey and Greece in 2020, but EU sanctions against Turkey undermined these efforts and reinforced both the operational and political dimensions of the divergence (Aydın, 2019; Casale, 2022). NATO's operational presence in the Black Sea is determined by Turkey's strategic contributions, while the EU's role in the region is mainly limited to political and economic instruments. This difference shows the reasons for the divergence in the security architectures of the two structures.

2. NATO-EU Divergence

2.1. Historical Origins and First Breaks

The initial reasons for the divergence between NATO and the EU can be traced back to the transformation of Europe's security needs at the end of the Cold War. The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s led the EU to develop its own crisis management capacity, and this process triggered the EU's desire to become an independent security actor without questioning NATO's leadership (Bilgin 2003). In this period, while NATO continued its collective defense mission, the EU's effort to become a single foreign policy voice through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) gave the first signals of the differentiation between these two structures. In the 2000s, the unilateral US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq raised serious doubts about NATO's effectiveness among European allies, and Turkey, while supporting US policies, experienced tensions in its relations with the EU (Purtaş, 2005). The US's tendency to use NATO for its own strategic interests accelerated the search for an autonomous defense capacity in Europe. This was one of the first breaking points of the NATO-EU divergence.

In the post-Berlin Plus Agreement period, the Turkey-Cyprus issue was a factor that deepened the divergence. By restricting the EU's access to NATO resources, Turkey hindered alliance cooperation and increased the EU's motivation to develop an autonomous defense structure (Aydın, 2015). The 2008 global financial crisis led the EU to question its dependence on NATO and increase its defense budgets; the decline in European countries' defense expenditures brought NATO burden-sharing debates to the agenda (Yiğittepe, 2017). In this period, the security situation arising from the EU's economic and political integration began to diverge from NATO's military-oriented structure; this divergence highlighted the differences in the strategic priorities of the two structures.

2.2. Strategic Autonomy and the EU's New Policies

The EU's quest for strategic autonomy has been an important policy objective since the 2010s. The EU's goal of reducing its dependence on the US and NATO in its security policies was clearly set out in the Global Strategy Paper published in 2016, which extended the EU's claim to be a global actor to the field of defense (Çelik, 2017). Strategic autonomy was not limited to military capabilities but also included dimensions such as economic resilience and technological independence. In line with this goal, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a mechanism that funds joint defense projects with the participation of 25 member states, was launched in 2017. The European Defense Fund (EDF) aims to strengthen the EU's technological autonomy by allocating €8 billion to the defense industry in the 2021-2027 budget (Turhan, 2019). PESCO projects such as Eurodrone and the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) reflect an effort to create an alternative to US technological hegemony; these projects have embodied the EU's goal of creating an independent ecosystem in the defense industry (Özışık, 2023).

The Brexit deal is an important turning point in the quest for strategic autonomy. The UK's departure from the EU in 2020 allowed Europe to pursue an independent path in defense policies; however, it also challenged NATO's influence in Europe (Yiğit, 2024). In the post-2019 period, the EU's defense expenditures increased by 10% and this increase was evaluated as a financial determination supporting the EU's autonomy goal (Aydın, 2019). Turkey has been unable to seize defense cooperation opportunities with the EU after Brexit; political tensions, especially disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Turkey's exclusion from PESCO projects have hindered this process (Doğan and Kabayel, 2023). The EU's strategic autonomy policies reflect Europe's effort to build its own security architecture away from NATO's collective defense structure, which has exacerbated the differences between the priorities of the two structures.

2.3. Current Dynamics and the Role of the US

The current dynamics of the NATO-EU divergence have been highlighted by crises such as the war in Ukraine and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led NATO to strengthen its deterrence strategy, deploying additional troops to Poland and the Baltic states and increasing security measures in the Black Sea (Ünüvar, 2024). The EU demonstrated its capacity by providing Ukraine with significant financial and military aid (European Commission, 2022). Turkey, which has adopted a neutral stance in the implementation of the Montreux Straits Convention, drew attention by selling UCAVs to Ukraine, supporting NATO's operational presence in the Black Sea (Baykara, 2022).

Energy resources and drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean are another current cause of divergence. The tensions between Turkey and Greece have brought the EU's sanctions against Turkey to the agenda, and as these threats continue, NATO's cohesion within the alliance has been questioned (Erol and Oğuz, 2021). The EU's 2021 report characterized Turkey's activities as 'provocative', while NATO's silence on the issue underlined the difference in the approaches of the two structures (Tsakiris, 2021). This tension has deepened the divergence as an area where geopolitical interests and energy security intersect.

The role of the US is one of the main reasons for the divergence. Under Donald Trump, his 'old-fashioned' criticism of NATO-led European leaders to develop their defense capacities, accelerated the EU's quest for autonomy (Yiğit, 2024). Although tensions have eased under the Biden administration, the US strategic shift towards the Asia-Pacific has put a strain on its obligations in Europe. Turkey's purchase of the S-400 and its exclusion from the F-35 program strained cohesion within NATO; the US Indo-Pacific strategy overtook NATO's Europe-focused mission (Oğuz, 2023; Howorth, 2020). This accelerated the EU's efforts for autonomy and enhanced the transatlantic dimension of the NATO-EU divergence.

3. The Effects of NATO-EU Divergence on Turkish Security Architecture

3.1. Historical Perspective and Current Developments

Throughout the Cold War, Turkey's security architecture was closely linked to NATO's collective defense framework. Upon joining NATO in 1952, Turkey positioned itself as a strategic buffer zone against the Soviet Union on the alliance's southeastern flank; the opening of Incirlik Base to US strategic bombers demonstrated Turkey's contribution to NATO's air defense system (Bilgin, 2003). The role of the Kürecik Radar Station in ballistic missile defense reinforced Turkey's support for the deterrence capacity of the alliance; this facility enhanced early warning and surveillance capabilities against ballistic missile threats in the post-Cold War era (Aydın, 2015). The security umbrella NATO provided to Turkey during this period was not only a military alliance but also the cornerstone of an ideological and strategic bond with the Western world. Turkey's NATO membership enabled Turkey to undertake the mission of protecting its southern flank in the bipolar Cold War structure; this role became one of the cornerstones of Turkey's security policies. With Donald Trump's second term as US president, the strategic importance of the Incirlik base has come under renewed debate; Trump's suspension of military aid to Ukraine has increased NATO's dependence on Turkish bases and put this historic role in a contemporary context (Reuters, 2025).

Relations with the EU have progressed in a different direction. The process, which started with the Ankara Treaty in 1963 with the aim of economic and political integration, evolved into a new phase with the candidate status in 1999. However, political and structural obstacles in full membership negotiations, especially the Cyprus problem and the EU's conditional attitude towards Turkey, prevented Turkey from fully integrating into the EU's security architecture (Efe, 2008). In the 1980s and 1990s, internal and external threats such as PKK terrorism and the 1991 Gulf War

increased Turkey's dependence on NATO, and NATO's military support, logistical assistance, and intelligence sharing played a key role in managing these crises. On the other hand, the EU's limited role in these processes created a perception of marginalization in Turkey and led Turkey to continue to shape its security policies around the NATO axis (Algür, 2019). Historically, Turkey's position in NATO can be defined as a "flanker", while relations with the EU have been more in the political and economic framework; this context suggests that Turkey's security architecture has been shaped under NATO's collective defense umbrella, while relations with the EU have a more limited security dimension.

Today, the divergence between NATO and the EU creates a new and multi-layered dynamic in Turkey's security architecture. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reaffirmed Turkey's geopolitical importance in the Black Sea and increased NATO's dependence on Turkey in its security strategies. The rigorous implementation of the Montreux Straits Convention has transformed Turkey into an actor protecting NATO's interests and providing a neutral balance in relations with Russia (Kostak, 2024). In this process, the sale of Bayraktar TB2 UCAVs to Ukraine demonstrated the international influence of the Turkish defense industry, and Baykar's plans to open a production facility in Ukraine made this cooperation even more important (Doğan and Kabayel, 2023). The Black Sea Grain Corridor Agreement signed in July 2022 underlined Turkey's diplomatic capacity on a global scale. Despite Russia's withdrawal in 2023, Turkey's mediation efforts continued and played an important role in the negotiations between Ukraine and Russia (Kısacık and Helvacıköylü, 2020). While these initiatives increased NATO's reliance on Turkey for its security needs in the Black Sea, the EU limited itself to financial and humanitarian aid in this process, making the impact of the divergence on Turkey more pronounced.

Drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean are another major factor escalating tensions between the EU and Turkey. While the operations of the Oruç Reis and Barbaros Hayreddin Pasha vessels in 2020 led to clashes with Greece and France, the commissioning of the Abdülhamid Han drillship in 2023 accelerated energy exploration activities and the EU put sanctions threats back on the table (Balcı, 2023). Turkey's geopolitical position in the Eastern Mediterranean makes it an important actor in terms of Europe's energy security; however, the EU's stance describing Turkey as "provocative" and its support for Greece further increases the pressure of the NATO-EU divergence on Turkey's security architecture (Erol and Oğuz, 2021). NATO's efforts to provide a neutral mechanism to mediate these tensions have been overshadowed by EU sanctions that hinder cohesion within the alliance. Greece's provocations in NATO exercises have further increased the impact of these tensions on Turkey (Kısacık and Helvacıköylü, 2020).

The S-400 crisis plays an important role in NATO-Turkey relations. The purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia triggered US CAATSA sanctions and Turkey's exclusion from the F-35 program, shaking trust within NATO and putting Turkey's relations with the alliance in question (Yiğittepe, 2017). The integration of the S-400 system into Turkey's air defense network has created political and technical problems by creating incompatibility with NATO standards; while this crisis challenges Turkey's position within the alliance, it also reveals Turkey's effort to develop an autonomous defense capacity (Yiğittepe, 2018). With this move, Turkey seeks an alternative to NATO's collective defense structure while maintaining its strategic importance on the alliance's southern flank. This dilemma demonstrates the direct impact of the NATO-EU divergence on Turkey's security policies.

Turkey's rise in the defense industry is one of the most striking results of this divergence. Ranked second in the world in defense industry exports, Turkey has increased its technological autonomy and global influence with the export of Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı UCAVs to Ukraine, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan, the first prototype flight of the TF-X project and the mass production of the Hürjet (Özışık, 2023). Baykar's exports exceeded \$1.5 billion in 2024, and further increases in this figure

show that Turkey is on its way to becoming an independent actor by getting rid of its dependence on NATO's defense industry. Turkey's geopolitical position at the crossroads of the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East makes these developments all the more important as Turkey plays an indispensable role in NATO's southern flank and Europe's energy security (Aydın, 2015). This success in the defense industry reinforces the opportunities offered to Turkey by the NATO-EU divergence and provides an opportunity to redefine its position within the alliance.

3.2. Risks and Opportunities

The effects of the NATO-EU divergence on Turkey's security architecture pose both serious risks and significant opportunities. The exclusion of Turkey in projects such as PESCO and EDF, which the EU has developed as part of its quest for strategic autonomy, limits the possibilities for technological cooperation and threatens the development potential of the defense industry. The exclusion of Turkey from the European Defense Fund has been an indicator of the EU's exclusionary policies; this attitude has increased the risk of a deeper rift between the EU and Turkey and has led Turkey to distance itself from European defense technologies (European Commission, 2022; Erol and Oğuz, 2021). This makes it difficult for Turkey to adapt to NATO technological standards and reinforces the EU's tendency to perceive Turkey as a 'competitor'. Energy tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean exacerbate this risk, while Greece's provocations in NATO exercises and the EU's threats of sanctions against Turkey weaken NATO's intra-alliance unity and have the potential to expose Turkey to regional isolation (Tsakiris 2021). While Turkey's geopolitical position is an important factor for Europe's energy security, the EU's exclusionary policies increase the pressure of divergence on Turkey. While disputes over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean test Turkey's capacity to act as a regional actor, the EU's support for Greece and Southern Cyprus complicates Turkey's efforts to defend its legitimate rights in the region. The EU's sanctions against Turkey are used as a tool of economic and political pressure, encouraging Turkey to pursue a more independent path in its security architecture rather than developing a partnership with the EU (Tsakiris 2021). The risk of isolation that Turkey faces in this process has the potential to create fragility not only in relations with the EU but also in cohesion within NATO.

The risks within NATO are becoming more evident with the S-400 crisis. Turkey's purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia triggered US sanctions (CAATSA Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) and led to Turkey's exclusion from the F-35 program (Yiğittepe, 2017). This has called into question Turkey's role in NATO's integrated defense systems; the S-400's incompatibility with NATO standards risks creating a technical gap in the alliance's air defense network (Yiğittepe, 2018). While Turkey's move reflects a search for an alternative autonomy to NATO's collective defense structure, it has had a destabilizing effect on trust within the alliance. In particular, Turkey's use of its veto power during the accession process of Sweden and Finland to NATO-led to serious debates within the alliance. While this step showed Turkey's effort to protect its strategic position in NATO, it was perceived by some allies as weakening alliance solidarity (Yiğittepe 2017). The ongoing debate over the use of the S-400s jeopardizes Turkey's operational contributions within NATO, such as the strategic use of the Incirlik base and the role of the Kürecik radar station in ballistic missile defense.

These risks complicate Turkey's efforts to strike a balance in its relations with NATO and the EU. Turkey's exclusion from projects such as PESCO and EDF by the EU increases the risk of technological isolation, while the S-400 crisis in NATO undermines trust within the alliance. Turkey's involvement in the divergence between these two structures has the potential for uncertainty in the security architecture; in particular, continued tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean strengthen the possibility of Turkey facing regional isolation. EU sanctions against Turkey could indirectly affect Turkey's ability to finance defense industry investments by

increasing economic pressure, which risks hampering Turkey's long-term pursuit of technological autonomy. Moreover, increased NATO criticism of Turkey could weaken solidarity within the alliance, forcing Turkey to reconsider its reliance on NATO in its security architecture.

On the other hand, the NATO-EU divergence also offers Turkey important opportunities. The developing defense industry is one of the biggest advantages of this divergence. The export of Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı UCAVs to Ukraine, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan, the first prototype flight of the TF-X project, and the serial production of the Hürjet have made Turkey's technological autonomy and global influence more evident (Özışık, 2023). Baykar's exports exceeded \$1.5 billion in 2024, and the further increase in this figure shows that Turkey is on its way to becoming an independent actor by getting rid of its dependence on NATO's defense industry. This achievement has also increased Turkey's contributions to NATO allies, for example by influencing the course of the war with its UCAV support to Ukraine, thereby demonstrating Turkey's strategic value within the alliance. This autonomy in the defense industry acts as a lever against exclusionary EU policies; by developing its own technology, Turkey can move forward without relying on EU projects such as PESCO.

The balancing policy in the Black Sea is another important opportunity for Turkey. The implementation of the Montreux Straits Convention during the Ukrainian War made Turkey a strategic actor in the eyes of both NATO and Russia; this neutral stance demonstrated Turkey's capacity to maintain regional stability (Baykara, 2022). The Black Sea grain corridor agreement signed in July 2022 demonstrated Turkey's contribution to global food security, and Turkey's continued mediation efforts strengthened its diplomatic competence despite Russia's withdrawal in 2023 (Kısacık and Helvacıköylü, 2020). This role has increased NATO's dependence on Turkey in its Black Sea security strategy and created a potential situation for detente in relations with the EU. Turkey's leadership in the Black Sea provides an opportunity to play a bridging role in the NATO-EU divide, potentially strengthening Turkey's military and diplomatic capabilities on a global scale.

Turkey's geopolitical position makes the opportunities offered by this divergence even more important. Situated at the crossroads of the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East, Turkey constitutes a strategic fulcrum on NATO's southern flank and plays an indispensable role in Europe's energy security (Aydın, 2015). Energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean increase Turkey's potential to become a regional energy hub and strengthen its ability to develop alternative energy routes despite the EU's exclusionary policies towards Turkey. For example, Turkey's maritime jurisdiction agreement with Libya has changed the balance in the Eastern Mediterranean and is one of the steps Turkey has taken to increase its energy security and geopolitical influence (Baykara, 2022). The NATO-EU divergence opens space for such independent initiatives, and Turkey can take advantage of these opportunities to autonomously shape its security architecture.

These risks and opportunities present Turkey's position in the NATO-EU divergence as a dilemma. While the EU's exclusionary policies and NATO's S-400 crisis put Turkey at risk of isolation, the boom in the defense industry and geopolitical advantages offer an opportunity to turn these pressures in its favor. Turkey's strategy in this process will determine the short-term and long-term future of its security architecture. While the risk of a rupture in relations with the EU pushes Turkey to pursue a more independent path, weakening ties with NATO complicates Turkey's efforts to maintain its strategic value within the alliance. On the other hand, autonomy in the defense industry and leadership in the Black Sea gives Turkey the opportunity to turn this divergence to its advantage, and this balance has the potential to redefine Turkey's role in the global security architecture.

While NATO's collective defense umbrella continues to provide security guarantees for Turkey, the EU's quest for strategic autonomy and exclusionary policies are forcing Turkey to develop an autonomous security architecture from its role as a "wing player" within the alliance or to take a more active role in the EU. Turkey is in a very important situation for the EU; Turkey's geopolitical position at the intersection of the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East and its second place in the defense industry are indispensable for the EU, especially when we evaluate the recent events. Therefore, Turkey can analyze this situation well and voice its demands. However, risks such as the S-400 crisis, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and EU sanctions require a careful strategy to manage this process. In particular, recent developments in the Ukraine-Russia war and the Trump administration's tendency to withdraw its support for Europe bring the NATO-EU divergence to an unprecedented breaking point.

4. Conclusion

The divergence between NATO and the European Union (EU) is a multifaceted and complex process shaping Turkey's security architecture. While NATO's collective defense structure offers Turkey a basic assurance, the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy and exclusionary policies have led Turkey to develop a more autonomous security architecture. The lingering effects of the Ukraine-Russia war, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and developments in the defense industry present Turkey with both risks and opportunities. However, recent events, especially in recent weeks, have taken this divergence to a new level. US President Donald Trump's decision to suspend military aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine during his second term and his desire to shift the burden from NATO to Europe have raised serious questions about the alliance's solidarity (Reuters, 2025). Trump's statements forced Europe to take on its own defense and brought back to the agenda a discourse questioning the applicability of NATO's Article 5, forcing the EU to take urgent steps to increase its own defense capacity (Borger, 2025). In this process, European leaders tried to form a united front against Trump's policies. On 6 March 2025, at a special EU summit in Brussels, leaders underlined their determination to increase defense spending and support for Ukraine, while European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared that Trump's withdrawal of support was a 'wake-up call for Europe' (Reuters, 2025). At the same summit, concrete steps were taken, including Norway's commitment to increase its military aid to Ukraine to €8 billion by 2025, demonstrating the EU's determination to support Ukraine independently of the US (The Telegraph, 2025). Trump's statement in the Oval Office on March 7, 2025, in which he increased pressure on Ukraine by describing Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions as 'something anyone can do' and said that Russia was easier to work with, can be seen as a breaking point that deepened the divergence between NATO and the EU (The Guardian, 2025). These speeches compel Europe to develop its own security architecture in the face of Trump's threat to withdraw from NATO's commitment to collective defense.

If Turkey can manage the NATO-EU divergence with a careful strategy in light of these new dynamics, it can move from being a "flanker" of the alliance to an autonomous and influential country in the global security architecture. Its position in the defense industry and geopolitical advantages support this potential. The fact that Trump's policies in recent weeks have pushed Europe to trust Turkey more may provide Turkey with an opportunity to articulate its long-awaited demands, such as EU membership and a revision of the Customs Agreement. Realizing this vision requires domestic political stability, economic resilience, and diplomatic competence. Turkey can build on this divergence by strengthening its relations with NATO, striking a pragmatic balance with the EU, and maintaining its autonomy in the defense industry. In this context, Turkey's growing strategic importance for the EU has become even more evident with recent events. The fact that Trump's policies have made Europe more dependent on Turkey for security and energy creates a unique opportunity for Turkey to put on the table issues that it has long demanded from the EU. In particular, visa liberalization for Turkish citizens and the revision of the Customs

Agreement, which entered into force in 1996, have become renegotiable in this period. While visa liberalization stands out as a step towards strengthening Turkey's human mobility and cultural ties with the EU, the revision of the Customs Agreement has the potential to protect Turkey's economic interests and increase its competitiveness in the EU market (Tocci, 2021). Moreover, Turkey's rise in the defense industry and its pioneering role in the Black Sea may cause the EU to reconsider its exclusionary policies towards Turkey and increase Turkey's chances to demand a more equal partnership ground in its relations with the EU.

Turkey's strategic position brings with it the opportunity to make additional demands when all developments are taken into account. For instance, Turkey's participation in EU projects such as PESCO and the European Defense Fund (EDF) could be mutually beneficial in terms of technological cooperation and defense industry integration. While Turkey's technological capabilities offered by companies such as ASELSAN and Baykar offer a capacity to support the EU's quest for autonomy, Turkey's involvement in these projects could reduce the risk of long-term technological isolation (Doğan and Kabayel, 2023). Moreover, proposing a cooperative framework for the joint management of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean could strengthen both Turkey's and the EU's energy security and potentially turn current tensions into a win-win scenario (Tsakiris 2021). Turkey's bridging role in the NATO- EU divide also justifies the demand for a broader security dialogue with the EU. These demands could enable Turkey to use its geopolitical advantages and autonomy in the defense industry to adopt a more proactive stance in relations with the EU. This breakpoint in 2025 provides a favorable ground for Turkey to demand from the EU not only economic and political benefits but also strategic partnership status. Moreover, Turkey's demand for deeper cooperation with the EU in areas such as migration management and cybersecurity could support regional stability and positively transform the EU's security perception of Turkey. While migration management reinforces Turkey's demand for burden-sharing, which it has been undertaking since 2016, cooperation in the field of cybersecurity could provide an opportunity to integrate the solutions offered by Turkish companies such as ASELSAN and STM against hybrid threats with the EU (Aydın, 2019).

At the same time, these developments point to the emergence of a new global order and balance. It reveals a tendency for the great powers to split into two main groups: a bloc of the United States, Russia, India, Iran, and Israel on the one hand, and an alliance of the United Kingdom, EU countries, and China on the other. This potential new world order reflects a redefinition of geopolitical competition and strategic alliances. The first group, led by the United States, constitutes an axis focused on military power and regional influence, while the second group, including the EU and China, represents an approach based on economic integration, technological autonomy, and multilateral cooperation (Walt, 2021). Turkey may be closer to the second group (EU, UK, China) due to its geographical proximity, economic ties, and historical relations with the EU, but the need to maintain balanced relations with the first group (especially the US, Russia, and Iran) stems from Turkey's geopolitical position and multilateral foreign policy tradition (İnaç, 2021). For instance, Turkey's NATO membership and strategic partnership with the United States require Turkey to maintain ties with the first group of actors, while energy and security relations with Russia and neighborhood dynamics with Iran necessitate this balance. On the other hand, Turkey's EU integration goals, cooperation with China on Silk Road projects, and defense industry partnerships with the UK post-Brexit place Turkey closer to the second group (Tocci, 2021).

In the context of this new world order, Turkey's demands in its relations with the EU go beyond bilateral relations and are part of a strategy to strengthen its position in global balances. Visa liberalization and the revision of the Customs Agreement could enable Turkey to participate more effectively in the economic and human mobility networks of the second group, while participation in PESCO/EDF and cooperation on cybersecurity could contribute to Turkey's quest for technological autonomy in this bloc. Demands for energy cooperation and migration management

in the Eastern Mediterranean could deepen Turkey's strategic partnership with the second bloc, while balanced relations with the first bloc could allow Turkey to maintain energy and security ties with actors such as Russia and Iran (Tsakiris, 2021). Turkey's ability to play a bridging role in this divergence could make it not only a regional power but also a global counterweight in the new world order, a role that depends on Turkey's ability to strengthen its relations with both NATO and the EU and develop pragmatic cooperation with rising powers such as Russia, China and India (Walt, 2021).

In conclusion, Turkey's recent strategic position is a turning point for maximizing the opportunities offered by the NATO-EU divergence. With Trump's policies pushing the EU to rely more on Turkey, Turkey's chances of negotiating with the EU on visa liberalization, revision of the Customs Agreement, participation in PESCO/FED, energy cooperation, security dialogue, migration management, and cybersecurity are increasing. These demands could combine Turkey's geopolitical advantages, defense autonomy, and diplomatic capacity to build a more equal and mutually beneficial partnership with the EU. Realizing these opportunities, however, depends on Turkey maintaining its domestic political stability, strengthening its economic resilience, and effectively using its diplomatic competence. If Turkey can manage this divergence with a careful strategy, it can position itself not only as a regional power but also as an independent and influential actor in the global security architecture. It offers a window of opportunity that embodies Turkey's potential to realize this vision; its effective use will shape Turkey's long-term security and prosperity goals. Moreover, this process reveals Turkey's potential to become a key player in the reshaping of global balances by assuming a balancing role between the two great power blocs in the new world order.

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